A Human-centred Strategy for Environmental Improvement: The Children's Dimension

Statement by
Richard Jolly
Deputy Executive Director
Programmes
United Nations Children's Fund
(UNICEF)

to the third session of the
Preparatory Committee of the
United Nations Conference on
Environment and Development

Geneva
Switzerland
28 August 1991

unicef

READER
FICHE

A Human-centred Strategy for Environmental Improvement: The Children's Dimension

UNICEF greatly welcomes the increased attention being paid to poverty and human development issues at this meeting, and we commend our Secretariat colleagues on the excellent documents, especially the ones on poverty, demographic trends and consumption patterns, environmental health aspects of development, education, training and awareness and human settlements. UNICEF hopes that such human and social issues — the human factor — will be emphasized even more in your discussions of environment and development.

Rights and commitments

Less than a year ago, at the World Summit for Children, the largest number of world leaders in history gathered at the United Nations to adopt a Declaration and Plan of Action for the survival, protection and development of children. To date over 100 heads of State and Government have signed this Declaration and Plan of Action. There is a specific section on children and the environment in this Plan. I quote:

> "Children have the greatest stake in the preservation of the environment and its judicious management for sustainable development as their survival and development depends on it. The child survival and development goals proposed for the 1990s in this Plan of Action seek to improve the environment by combating disease and malnutrition and promoting education. These contribute to lowering death rates as well as birth rates, improved social services, better use of natural resources and, ultimately, to the breaking of the vicious cycle

of poverty and environmental degradation.

"With their relatively low use of capital resources and high reliance on social mobilization, community participation and appropriate technology, the programmes designed to reach the child-related goals of the 1990s are highly compatible with and supportive of environmental protection. The goals for the survival, protection and development of children as enunciated in this Plan of Action should therefore be seen as helping to protect and preserve the environment. Still more action is needed, of course, to prevent the degradation of the environment in both the industrialized and the developing countries, through changes in the wasteful consumption patterns of the affluent and by helping to meet the necessities of survival and development of the poor. Programmes for children that not only help to meet their basic needs but which inculcate in them respect for the natural environment with the diversity of life that it sustains and its beauty and resourcefulness that enhance the quality of human life, must figure prominently in the world's environmental agenda."

The international community also made another major commitment when the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989, came into force less than a year later on 2 September 1990, and has now been ratified by more than 100 countries. I do not wish to cite from the Convention, but it is important to recognize that this unique instrument provides us with the legal and moral framework for a host of actions required to safeguard the lives of all the world's children.

In 1992, in Brazil, the Earth Summit will take place. We hope that the Earth Summit remembers the political and legal commitments already made to the children of the world, and specifically the commitment to programmes for children.

Environment and development — the children's dimension

May I now indicate the UNICEF position on some of the issues which have been much debated here during the last three weeks.

Very little works in any development activity unless the human aspects of development are central. Development is for people, not the other way around. We need to remember these simple truths as we urgently seek solutions to our complex environment and development problems.

Yet all too often, we find that our concerns for people — and especially for women and children — are considered separately from our concerns for the environment. So I would like to begin by making four points on the special links between children and the environment.

First, children have the most vital stake in the future of our environment. Children, after all, are our future. It was stressed by the General Assembly at its 1987 session that sustainable development implies "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Second, children are more vulnerable than any other population group to environmental degradation, because their bodies and minds are still young — and growing. The effects of pollution from mercury, pesticides and other toxic chemicals are most keenly felt by children, and by virtue of their youth, any impact will affect them for a longer period than those older.

Third, it is the young who most readily show the energy and vision to find solutions for the future. As the Brundtland Commission noted in its hearings on environment and development, "It was the young, those who have the most to lose, who were the harshest critics of the planet's present management."

Fourth, children form a large part of the population, almost half in many developing countries. The totality of their well-being is what we want, and for this, an integrated, human approach towards environment and development is required. A child-focused approach to environment can thus bring fresh light to many environmental issues. Let me illustrate.

Misperceptions

Misperceptions often persist regarding environmental degradation. The degradation is seen more in terms of global, legal and ecological issues — for instance, climate change, greenhouse gases, ozone depletion, biodiversity, water resources, desertification and toxic chemicals. Admittedly, many developing countries will suffer greatly from global warming and climate change. And many developing countries are feeling the impact of desertification. There is also an urgent need to address matters such as the transport and dumping of hazardous wastes, the export to developing countries of drugs and toxic chemicals which have been already banned or restricted in industrialized countries, and the irresponsible promotion, by multinational corporations, of breastmilk substitutes and tobacco products in the developing countries. So international and national actions to address these problems — some of which have already been discussed by this Preparatory Committee — are without a doubt vital.

However, what is often underemphasized, and indeed largely neglected, are the human, social and development aspects. *For every environmental issue, there is a development aspect, especially a human development aspect.* Unless such aspects are adequately addressed, the effectiveness of any environmental action will be impaired or insignificant.

As a country moves along the path of development from poverty to affluence, its priorities, and therefore its perception of 'environment' changes. Those who can afford to turn their attention to global issues such as climate change and ozone depletion are those who have achieved success against poverty, preventable disease, malnutrition and hunger — in short, those who have achieved success in their immediate environment. For the majority of people in the developing world, however, degradation of the environment is seen and felt on a different and more immediate scale — that is, in terms of the struggle to meet their basic needs at the household and community level. I will repeat here a phrase we at UNICEF often use: those who cannot provide the basic necessities of life for their children cannot be expected to care for the environment. On the other hand, an ideal environment would be understood in terms of healthy children, clean and adequate water, adequate food, education and shelter.

For most people in the South, this view of the environment is not a matter of choice: it is one of necessity. The poverty-environmental degradation linkage has been discussed in previous forums — such as the UNCED/UNFPA/UNICEF-sponsored symposium 'Women and Children First' — and in this one as well. I hope this Preparatory Committee will note carefully the conclusions of this symposium.

Because of this great disparity in development between the North and the South, there is also a disparity in their views of environment, and in their respective priorities for addressing environmental degradation. So I stress here that both developed and developing countries, both North and South, must take steps to redress this imbalance:

- The North has a responsibility to make major changes towards more sustainable lifestyles with less wasteful consumption patterns. International initiatives must also be taken to address the problems of debt, trade and structural adjustment, which contribute to the unsustainable use of natural resources, and thus to the environmental degradation in the South.
- The developing countries must help themselves, by paying greater attention to human development, and be helped to mitigate the manifestations of critical poverty through fulfillment of basic needs and amenities, and in doing so, to improve the environment — what I would call a human-centred strategy of environmental improvement.

A human-centred strategy for environmental improvement

Such a strategy would have several key characteristics:

Priority should be accorded to meeting basic human needs in an environmentally sustainable manner, and to the empowerment of communities, with the targeted communities becoming sensitized to environmental issues in the process. The participation and involvement of women and children would also be crucial. This has long been the UNICEF commitment and approach in development work. Such an approach has also been urged and promoted by several NGOs, and has been termed 'primary

environmental care', notably by OXFAM. We therefore greatly welcome the strong voice of the NGOs at these Preparatory Committee meetings.

Strategies and actions must be critically judged by the impact they have on people at the community and household level. This could be, for example, the impact on sectors such as child health and development, water and sanitation, food security, education, household energy and income generation or employment. These sectors form synergistic parts of an integrated whole, the whole in this case being the well-being of the community. Thus action taken in one strategically chosen sector can catalyse changes in other sectors, and, ultimately, benefits are generated that may far exceed the original input.

Community participation will be vital to ensure that the assessment of problems, formulation of strategies, implementation, monitoring and evaluation all take into account the environment at a local level. Cost-effective approaches, social mobilization, and adaptation to local cultures and priorities are also essential. Efforts are only sustainable when the benefits make sense, or are tangible, at the community level. In the short term, benefits of community-level action are more easily visible than actions on larger scale. In order to sustain community-level change, however, national-level policies must form a favourable framework.

None of this is to say that global actions are not of urgent priority. On the contrary, the kind of local-level human-focused environmental strategy outlined here should take place simultaneously with the actions on the broader issues such as debt, structural adjustment, climate change and deforestation. Only then can we hope to make an impact on poverty and environmental degradation.

The contribution of UNICEF

UNICEF in its own programmes struggles to follow these principles, and, increasingly, our programmes are directed to environmental support. Perhaps it would be appropriate for me to mention some examples.

Water and sanitation are critical links in the chain of diarrhoeal disease that claims almost 4 million children's lives each year in the developing countries. Provision of clean water and safe sanitation, combined with the mobilization and involvement of local women, has resulted in not only saving the lives of children and better health for the community, but also a much wider community consciousness regarding environmental hygiene. Based on this 'entry point', activities such as health care and food preparation, home gardening and income generation may be further developed.

In this context, we welcome the Dublin Conference on Water and Environment. As you are probably aware, UNICEF is one of the major agencies for water and sanitation, and our programme expenditure in this sector exceeded $80 million in 1990.

Another example is household food security programmes in semi-arid countries that are prone to drought. Emphasis on drought-resistant indigenous food crops, with food products that can be marketed, also helps to diversify the local economy. And when the incomes generated are controlled by women, improvements take place in the nutritional well-being of the family, the status of the women, and community awareness of environmental management.

Other interventions which help to improve the environment at a community level include:

- Promotion of fuel-efficient and smoke-free stoves, small-scale agroforestry projects and community wood lots, solar stoves and biogas;
- Support for food and nutrition information systems; access to small-scale credit, appropriate technologies and other facilities for rural women especially in planting, harvesting, storage and food processing; small-scale irrigation and urban kitchen gardens;
- Support for rainwater harvesting, solar pumps and other appropriate technologies; water supply, environmental sanitation and hygiene particularly in urban slum areas;
- Support for innovative income-generation activities, especially for women, such as weaving, bee-keeping, paper-making, processing and marketing of indigenous medicinal plants;
- Support for environmental education and community sensitization in environmental issues, with particular emphasis on literacy in women and the education of the girl child;

• Maternal and child health interventions which encompass all aspects that contribute to their well-being.

UNICEF is involved in all these environmental activities, with perhaps a half of programme resources being directly related to control of water and sanitation, and disease control. Expenditure for women-related programmes as a part of sectoral programming was 31 per cent in 1990. But most important of all, all our activities are small scale and 'environment-friendly'.

Population and resources

May I now deal with the important though often misperceived issues of population and resources.

First, let us note clearly that a decline in population growth rates is one of the essential factors for reducing the pressure on the environment and resources, and therefore the population issue must be addressed.

Second, let us note equally clearly that the population issue will not be resolved as long as the poor live in a situation of general inequity, ignorance, poverty, disease and high mortality, and as long as women have little other choice or economic alternative. For this reason, maternal and child health programmes must be integrated with family planning, and such services must be made widely available. In addition, other components that increase the well-being of the community, such as education, food, water and sanitation are also be considered as essential for changing of a society's norms. Promotion of knowledge and use of oral rehydration therapy will also enhance the sense of confidence and empowerment of parents. All this is the inescapable basis for a sustained solution of the population-resource problem.

Third, at the same time let us keep a proper perspective on resource issues. Children born today in the North will, throughout their lifetimes, pollute much more of the world's environment and deplete more of its resources than those born in the developing South. This is brought out in the excellent paper prepared by the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, which was commissioned for the preparation of UNCED reports. For example, a person in the North is responsible for carbon dioxide emissions 8 to

27 times more than a person from the South, even when the cooking needs of the poor from burning fuelwood are taken into consideration. A person from the North also uses or consumes 14 to 115 times more paper, 6 to 52 times more meat, 10 to 35 times more commercial energy, and several times more metals than a person from the South. Further, much of this profligate consumption in the North is linked to styles of affluence, and not to basic survival needs. The high-consumption lifestyles of the North, and, increasingly, of the affluent in the developing countries are responsible for much of the environmental degradation, and this is a problem that will have to be urgently addressed if the so-called common responsibilities of nations towards the environment in the Earth Charter are to have any meaning.

Summary

In closing, may I reiterate the total commitment of UNICEF to the Earth Summit, and our full support for this Preparatory Committee in its work to form a programme of action and establish an appropriate charter. May I also urge you to give strong emphasis in your work to these five basic points:

1. That a human-centred poverty-reduction development approach to environment comes through loud and clear;

2. That the human goals endorsed by the World Summit for Children are essential for the reduction of poverty;

3. That an emphasis is kept on what the North must do, and what the South must do;

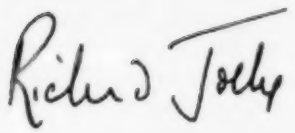
4. That children and young people should be recognized as most potent and aware supporters of environmental thinking;

5. That we must find models of development which will fully realize the human potential while avoiding profligate consumption. Focusing on human development offers a way to do this and to improve the quality of life of both North and South.

Let us therefore put high value on the human potential, and remind ourselves of synergisms that have their source in the human being.

There is first the synergism between fulfilment of the goals of the World Summit for Children and actions taken to improve the environment. Then there are other synergisms such as the commitment and the will of people, the participation of women, youth, children and indigenous people, the human potential for mobilization and the great achievements that are possible from all of these combined.

We need to find a way to harness all these forces into one broad movement — a movement that will protect and improve the environment for future generations. On behalf of UNICEF, may I express the hope that this will be the outcome of the Earth Summit in Brazil.



Richard Jolly
Deputy Executive Director, Programmes
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Geneva, 28 August 1991

References

1. UNICEF, 1991: *The State of the World's Children 1991*. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

2. UNICEF and UNEP, 1990: *Children and the Environment*. UNEP, Nairobi and UNICEF, New York.

3. UNICEF, 1989: 'Children and the Environment: a UNICEF strategy for sustainable development'. Executive Board Paper E/ICEF/1989/L.6.

4. 1991: Report of the Symposium 'Women and Children First', Geneva, May 27-30, 1991. Sponsors: UNCED, UNFPA, Government of Denmark and UNICEF. Research Paper No. 2, commissioned by UNCED.

Glossary

NGO	non-governmental organization
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

Printed on recycled paper